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The Palestinian Authority, headed by Yasser Arafat, is paying members of a Palestinian militant organisation which has been responsible for carrying out suicide attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians, a BBC investigation has found.

A total of up to \$50,000 a month is being sent to members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an armed group that emerged shortly after the outbreak of the current Palestinian intifada, a BBC Correspondent programme reveals.



Al-Aqsa militants have never been publicly backed by Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction

A former minister in the government led by ex-Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) says that the money is an attempt to wean the gunmen away from suicide bombings. He says the policy of paying the money was not instigated by Mr Arafat but has been carried out with his knowledge and agreement.

Despite the payments, the al-Aqsa group has not declared a formal ceasefire and Mr Arafat has not asked the group to stop the suicide bombings, according to an al-Aqsa leader interviewed by the programme. The Palestinian leader has publicly condemned recent Palestinian suicide bombings.

'Living expenses'

Abdel Fattah Hamayel, the minister for sports and youth until Abu Mazen resigned in September implemented the policy of paying what he describes as living expenses to the gunmen. He told Correspondent:

"Originally, some people in these groups had been chosen to work for the security services, so they were getting salaries and still are doing so."

He says this summer a decision was taken by the Palestinian Cabinet to pay living expenses to those al-Aqsa members not getting these salaries to help support their families.



The US and Israel have refused to negotiate with the Palestinian leader

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He says the money is intended to ensure that al-Aqsa members were not influenced by outside organisations to carry out further suicide bombings. Al-Aqsa has not claimed to have carried out any suicide bombings since May.

Asked how the Palestinian Authority could be sure that the money was not spent on weapons, Mr Hamayel replied: "The amount sent to them is very small. At most, it's not more than \$250 per person. How can anyone buy weapons with this amount of money?"

“ When Arafat calls for a ceasefire, we will respect his decision and stop ”
Zakaria Zubaydi, al-Aqsa leader

In April 2002, Israeli troops stormed Mr Arafat's compound in Ramallah as part of a widespread incursion into the West Bank in response to a number of suicide attacks. Israeli officials claim that they found documents proving that the Palestinian leader was funding Palestinian suicide bombers.

They used this as part of their argument, supported by US President George W Bush, that Mr Arafat could not be trusted and that rather than opposing terrorism, he was, in fact, encouraging it.

Fatah links

Close links between Mr Arafat's political faction Fatah and al-Aqsa are also discovered by the programme. One local Fatah leader in the West Bank town of Jenin says that the al-Aqsa group is the military wing of his organisation and that Mr Arafat is the overall leader of both the political and military arms.

"Fatah has two sections: a military wing, led by the military and a political wing, led by politicians. But there is no difference between Fatah and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades," a leader of Fatah in the Jenin refugee camp tells Correspondent.

Asked if al-Aqsa would formally end hostilities with Israeli if asked to by Mr Arafat, Zakaria Zubaydi, the leader of the group in Jenin says:

"Of course. But he won't order us to do this until Israel stops the assassinations."

He adds: "When Arafat calls for a ceasefire, we will respect his decision and stop."

Correspondent: Arafat Investigated will be broadcast in the UK on BBC Two at 1915GMT on Sunday, 9 November.

Immediately after the programme, BBC correspondent Jeremy Bowen will answer your questions in a live interactive discussion.

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